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Time, Exhortation and Planning in British Government, c.1959 - c.1979

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Time is not an absolute. It cannot be shown to pass in a linear manner, as Einstein's 1905 theory of special relativity long ago demonstrated. It is, instead, a relative measure: one that critically depends on one's point of observation.¹ Anthropological studies have therefore tried to show how humans grapple with their relativist and pliable *senses* of time across a very broad and eclectic front: via episodic or sustained rituals, to be sure, but also within and through language, experienced as tropes, grammar and within concepts of space and ideas about temporal segmentation as well as 'time' in and of itself.² Sociologists make a related point when they dissect modern 'time cultures', dissecting the manner in which different societies shape their understanding of time via life practices: what they *do at*, rather than what they think *during* or how they speak *about*, different times of the day or year.³

Time is in fact a highly protean concept: mediated, context-specific and dependent on the observer's point of view. This concept has found some support in the field of empirical psychological research, for human beings themselves appear to be not very good at telling what the 'objective' time might be – especially when they are asked to remember the passage of nominal or theoretical time. Most people squeeze retrospective time together more closely than prospective time; attentiveness seems to lengthen temporal perception, as does expectancy; their ability to measure the passing of time is easily disrupted by parallel distracters or 'interference' effects.⁴ In another, very different field post-structuralist philosophers such as Michel Foucault long based much of their entire appeal on a critique of 'time' defined as a long

¹ P. Galison, *Einstein's Clocks, Poincaré's Maps: Empires of Time*, London 2003, 14-26.

² A. Gell, *The Anthropology of Time: Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images*, Oxford 1992, 326-7.

³ e.g. E. Shove, "Everyday Practice and the Production and Consumption of Time", in: E. Shove, F. Trentmann and R. Wilk (eds.), *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life: Practice, Materiality and Culture*, Oxford, 2009, 17-34.

⁴ S.W. Brown, 'Time and Attention: Review of the Literature', in: S. Grondin (ed.), *Psychology of Time*, Oxford, 2008, 114-21.

sequence of given causes that led inexorably to set ‘consequences’ that developed inevitably at different rates of linear time. Instead, Foucault underscored the potential of unexpected, chaotic ‘heterotopias’, disintegrating apparently modern, but actually in part sacred and inherited, definitions of any fixed sense of ‘time’.⁵

Such observations are a commonplace of early twenty-first century historiography. But historians’ own and more empirical investigations carry more precise implications for our study of time in late twentieth century British governance. Many types of temporality have always been detectable in the literature. Historians have long understood that time can seem to pass very differently, for instance, at each long-term geological stratum of human experience. As the great historical geographer Fernand Braudel put it in the 1960s, very long-range physical processes such as the formation of mountains, seas and rivers are the structure or arena within which narrative human history happens (at different rates) in the first place.⁶ In the same decade the Marxist social historian E.P. Thompson detected a shift in timekeeping from the episodic to the regular, a ‘greater synchronization of labour and a greater exactitude in time-routines’, associated with industrialisation and the greater availability of timepieces around the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – claims that have not gone uncontested, but retain their influence nonetheless.⁷ But aside from Benedict Anderson’s insights into the creation of the modern state, actually *operationalising* and *using* such insights in the service of more traditional academic history has proved much more difficult.⁸

⁵ M. Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, in: *Diacritics* 16 (1986) 1, esp. 22-3, 26.

⁶ F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, English trans., abridged edn., London 1992, 651.

⁷ E.P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism”, in: *Past and Present* 38 (1967), 80; see for a contrary view H-J. Voth, *Time and Work in England 1750-1830*, Oxford, 2000, 73, 75, 268-74.

⁸ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 2006 edn., esp. 26.

Historians have also attempted to address the problem of how time is constructed, shaped and worked – or reworked – in more humdrum settings. Paul Glennie and Nigel Thrift have shown how the emergence of modernistic ‘clock time’, minutely measuring and enforcing the passage of time, emanated initially from ‘communities of practice’ which accepted and propagated such technologies of use: that this type of time ‘comprises a number of *concepts*, *devices*, and *practices* which have meant different things at different times and places’.⁹ The concepts that historians have mobilised might very crudely be summated in order as ‘structural’, ‘economic’, ‘ideological’ and ‘practical’ views of time – the first dealing with changes in the environment over very long periods of ‘deep time’, and the second with the structure of marketed or planned transactions over many years or perhaps decades. The category of ‘ideological’ time deals not so much in and of itself with different lengths of time, but with changing views of the state and of individuals and groups, while the last concept of ‘practical’ time is usually applied to habits and perceptions of the everyday, hour-by-hour lives as they are lived and constantly experienced and re-imagined.

Applying these approaches to modern governance requires deep research to draw out the specific implications of these insights. This article will therefore attempt to compare and contrast these new historical approaches with and to the impressions that arise from the empirical evidence, drawing mainly on both private and published official government papers from the period itself. During the post-war economic ‘golden age’ that stretched from the early 1950s to the first years of the 1970s, the sense that different timeframes were being experienced became more acute as the UK seemed to move ‘down’ indices of economic development. Measures of change over time were imagined during the immediate post-war era in a positivist, hopeful and progressive manner, spreading out across the globe too as other nations became ‘developed’. But by the late 1960s and the 1970s, in an era of perceived economic crisis and resource shortage, such measures of past and future were often negatively constructed. By this point Britain in particular had been imaginatively relegated to the

⁹ P. Glennie and N. Thrift, *Shaping the Day: A History of Timekeeping in England and Wales, 1300-1800*, Oxford, 2009, 9.

historical slow lane because of her sluggish ‘pace of movement’.¹⁰ Such shifting perceptions make this a good case study of governmental time, for as the challenges facing modern governments came to seem more acute, and time ever shorter, the sense grew that the policy-making community was adrift in temporal uncertainty. Four types of temporal reasoning and reaction will be delineated here: exhortation; planning; crisis management; and, finally, the abandonment of long-term thinking altogether. To the first of these – a type of rhetorical time – we first turn.

1. Rhetorical Time: The 1950s

One type of indeterminate or ‘timeless’ time often encountered in official discourses during the late 1950s involved attempts to maintain freedom of manoeuvre, or indeed attempts to avoid or wait out difficult decisions – political impulses that owe much to the same impulses investigated by historians of epistemic politics and ideology. When the Conservative Chancellor Selwyn Lloyd came to consider expenditure restraint during a round of spending cuts in 1960, the Prime Minister was told that ‘[he will] not ask the Cabinet for definite approval to any particular time-table’, to which Prime Minister Harold Macmillan responded in the subsequent meeting with the riposte ‘corrective action should be taken in time, if there was a real need for it’.¹¹ But there was also a deeper sense in which this type of ‘political’ or ‘indefinite’ timeframe meant pushing forward optimistic developments to the extent that they became merely aspirations. Incomes policy under Macmillan was supposed to allow time in which ‘to work out a better system for keeping increases in incomes in line with increases in output’. It was left to Conservative Party officials, in private, to aver that they believed that this might – just possibly – involve a ‘two or three year’ timeframe.¹²

¹⁰ J. Tomlinson, “Inventing ‘Decline’: The Falling Behind of the British Economy in the Postwar Years”, in: *Economic History Review* 49 (1996) 4, 738, 743.

¹¹ The National Archives of the UK, Kew, London (hereafter TNA) PREM 11/3291, Bligh to Phelps, 16 June 1960; TNA CAB 128/34, Cabinet minutes, 21 June 1960.

¹² TNA T 298/213, Hill circular to Ministers, 23 November 1961; Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, Oxford (hereafter CPA) CRD 2/7/16, Sewill memorandum, 6 December 1961.

Industrial and macroeconomic planning themselves were often conducted in the episodic and dateless terms of strategic political time that allowed policy actors their desired room for manoeuvre: the National Economic Development Council's sub-committees considered each industry's prospects 'from time to time', while government White Papers announcing an incomes policy and setting up an Incomes Commission referred only to 'steady progress' over some 'considerable time' and 'keeping the rate of increase of... monetary wages within the long-term rate of increase of national production'. The meaning of 'the long-term' was left unspecified, partly due to divisions within government as to how distinct and specific their goals could be.¹³

This generally hazy timeframe was extremely useful in urging others on towards ever-higher efforts, for its vagueness allowed any time at all to be the urgent 'now' of economic or social necessity. Pamphlets, speeches and minutes from the time are full of exhortations aimed at the citizenry at large – especially those from the late 1950s and early 1960s, when a Conservative administration was grappling with the reality of an unfamiliar and unwelcome relative economic decline. As Macmillan told Parliament after his 1959 election victory, 'what is required is a common effort by both sides of industry on whom lies the responsibility to shape and adjust the pattern of industrial relations to the needs of the time. With close consultation and co-operation among all concerned, including the Government, I feel sure that we can grasp the opportunities before us'.¹⁴ John Hare as Minister of Labour similarly announced, in an airy manner, that 'this is a time when industry must be quick to adopt improved methods and exploit new techniques'.¹⁵ It was a vague and watery appeal to no time in particular that blended elements of ideological time, with its lack of hard-and-fast temporal distinctions and limits, with discourses of pragmatism and

¹³ J. Leruez, *Economic Planning and Politics in Britain*, London 1975, 108-9; Cmnd. 1626, *Incomes Policy: The Next Step*, London 1962; Cmnd. 1844, *National Incomes Commission*, London 1962, 4; G. O'Hara, "'Intractable, Obscure and Baffling': The Incomes Policy of the Conservative Government, 1957-64", in: *Contemporary British History* 18 (2004) 1, 32-3.

¹⁴ *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 612, cols. 72-3, Debate on the Address, 27 October 1959.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, vol. 671, cols. 1503-4, Second Reading, Contracts of Employment Bill, 14 February 1963.

the easily imaginable day-to-day achievements of practical time. That reflected Ministers' operation of a system that seemed to be functioning fairly well: a perception that was not to last.

2. Planning Time: The Early 1960s

For a few years, such imprecise expostulations were indeed replaced by a much sharper sense of timekeeping, with plans issued with very specific endpoints and targets – a shift to rhetorics that were supposed to be more in line with how the economy worked and was changing. In the years between the Macmillan Conservative Government's turn towards '*dirigisme*' and 'modernisation' in 1961, and the faltering of Labour's planning experiment during the economic crises of 1966-67 just such quantifiable long-term projections and designs were at the very heart of government. There was a ten-year plan for the National Health Service, issued under Enoch Powell as Health Secretary in 1962; there were new plans for Britain's 'economically disadvantaged' regions that looked a decade into the future, published during 1962 and 1963, and even central government spending was supposed to be settled over a three- to four-year planning horizon.¹⁶ Most revealing of all, inside Whitehall a so-called 'Very Long Term Planning Group' was set up early in 1965, to look ahead twenty years and examine the likely shape of society and the economy in the 1980s. Mostly made up of civil servants, with some academic 'irregulars' such as the housing economist Alan Holmans drafted in too, this attempted to draw on long-term planning within 'non-economic' departments, for instance health, education and transport – with mixed results.¹⁷ For half a decade the definite was supposed to replace the indefinite, and timetabled achievements supplant an ever-receding vista of possible conjunctions.

¹⁶ P. Dorey, *The Conservative Party and the Trade Unions*, London 1995, 51; G. O'Hara, *From Dreams to Disillusionment: British Economic and Social Planning in the 1960s*, Basingstoke 2007, e.g. 72-3, 76-83, 112-15, 167, 179-98.

¹⁷ TNA EW 24/4, Secretaries' memorandum to Plan Working Party, 8 January 1965. See G. O'Hara, *Governing Post-War Britain: The Paradoxes of Progress, 1951-1973*, Basingstoke, 2012, 126.

Above all there was Labour's National Plan, enumerated in 1965, which promised a sustained break-through to higher productivity, growth and welfare across a five-year time horizon.¹⁸ The Plan was accompanied by a great deal of media promotion, and two popular broadsheets supposed to cement its reputation and prospects by yoking together indefinite exhortation with some more specific temporal aims: *Working for Prosperity* and *Upswing*. The latter looked forwards five years and promised and 'upswing in living standards—by 1970 it is expected that three households out of five may own a car . . . The money spent on television and radio sets and electrical equipment is likely to increase by about 30 per cent'.¹⁹ These more precise urgings would, however, be prove hard to deliver in reality. Even Labour's newly-created but short-lived Department of Economic Affairs, created in 1964 to plan for the long-term and encourage more 'scientific' growth, announced to begin with only that it would 'take the lead' in 'implementation of the Plan' only 'when the time comes'.²⁰

Even the National Plan itself contained just that commitment to 'periodic', but unspecified, reviews that was the hallmark of NEDC's and NIC's earlier entreaties to public co-operation. 'The Plan will be kept under regular review', the text ran: 'periodic re-assessments will be made so that Government and industry can base their plans on the latest information available'.²¹ Labour stuck to exactly the same formula as had the previous government – that they would reconsider the situation 'from time to time' – when Ministers again and again reiterated their promise to review and renew the National Plan even long after its fundamental premises were undermined by

¹⁸ P. Addison, *No Turning Back: The Peaceful Revolutions of Post-War Britain*, Oxford 2010, 145-6.

¹⁹ J. Tomlinson, "Managing the Economy, Managing the People: Britain c.1931–70", in: *Economic History Review* 58 (2005) 3, 572.

²⁰ DEA, *Progress Report*, April 1965, 1-2. On the DEA see H. Pemberton, *Policy Learning and British Governance in the 1960s*, Basingstoke 2004, pp. 128-32, 165-7, and C. Clifford and A. McMillan, "Witness Seminar: The Department of Economic Affairs", in: *Contemporary British History* 11 (1997) 2, 117-42.

²¹ Cmnd. 2764, *The National Plan*, London 1965, 21.

events.²² Those intervals gradually became longer and less convincing, and such reviews looked ahead over a much shorter timeframe. Treasury planning documents issued in 1969 and 1970, after the abolition of the DEA were consultative ‘planning documents’ designed for discussion and encouragement. They looked ahead only two to three years – a notable retreat from the five- or even twenty-year plans considered by the Wilson governments in their first and more confident pre-devaluation phase.²³

Looking far ahead faced the problem that policy effects flowed in at different times, which were usually highly contingent and often of unknown length. Some effects were seasonal, for instance in terms of wage settlements, whereas others (for instance, the economy’s readjustment to low interest rates if physical government controls were to take some of the strain of reducing demand), might take many years.²⁴ Regional policy might take even longer, depending on it on changing deep-seated social norms (such as migration) as well as economic realities, while supply-side policies such as better scientific education and training might take nearly as long for similar reasons.²⁵ Judging the temporal order in which changes might occur was another problem as acute as the difficulties revealed by just that regional policy – namely, understanding the geographical effects of different policies.²⁶ The different time lags involved in public investment having any effect, and almost certainly carrying them forward only as the economy began to expand again and adding to

²² *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 735, cols. 341-2, Michael Stewart, written answer, 10 November 1966.

²³ HM Treasury, *The Task Ahead: Economic Assessment to 1972*, London 1969; HM Treasury, *Economic Prospects to 1972: A Revised Assessment*, London 1970.

²⁴ TNA PREM 11/2962, Heathcoat Amory to Macmillan, 23 February 1959; *Harvester Archives of the British Labour Party*, Sussex 1977-78, Labour Party Research Department (hereafter HABLP LPRD), Memoranda, I/RE 290, Balogh memorandum to finance and economic policy sub-committee, January 1958.

²⁵ CPA CRD 2/23/14, Conservative Party Housing, Local Government and Works committee, minutes 13 July 1960; Cmnd. 1490, *The Long-Term Demand for Scientific Manpower*, London 1961, iv.

²⁶ On this see most recently J. Hopkins, “Translating the Transnational: American ‘Science’ and the British Regional Problem, 1962–1965”, in: *Contemporary British History* 27 (2013) 2, 167-91.

those pressures, was one of the Treasury's standard objections to the idea of a Scandinavian-style 'shelf' of projects ready to approve at any one time.²⁷

International bodies such as the Organisation for European Economic Co-Operation made clear this was not an isolated British problem, but rather one common to modern economic policy-making. There were 'major gaps and serious delays' across member countries' information gathering, statistics, and reaction time, the OEEC pointed out in 1961, and the problem did not seem to diminish with time.²⁸ The Wilson Government did a substantial and serious programme of statistical reform, though its effects did not bear fruit as swiftly as Ministers or civil servants would have liked.²⁹ Officials' judgement as to the likelihood of being able to concern fiscal, monetary and structural investment policy when Ministers asked for potential reflation measures in 1966 bears repeating at length:

Measures to stimulate investment demands take effect over a longer time-scale than measures to stimulate consumer demand. The effect of any set of reflationary measures would... be uncertain; the Government cannot control the behaviour of the economy as closely as could be wished... and it may be difficult to steer a middle course being doing too little to have any significant effect and doing so much that the rise in demand is a good deal faster than intended.³⁰

The Government's Chief Economic Adviser, Alec Cairncross, concurred in an opposite and deflationary situation at the beginning of 1968: 'we are uncertain about the pace at which the various changes are likely to take place; and of course if we are wrong about the pace we may also be wrong about the sequence'.³¹ The different rates

²⁷ N. Rollings, "Bustkellism, the Post-War Consensus and the Managed Economy", in: H. Jones and M. Kandiah (eds.), *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History, 1945-64*, Basingstoke 1996, 103.

²⁸ OEEC, *The Problem of Rising Prices*, Paris 1961, 38-9.

²⁹ H. Wilson, "Statistics and Decision-Making in Government: Bradshaw Revisited", in: *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A* 136 (1973) 1, 1-20; P.G. Moore, "Obituary: James Harold Wilson 1916-95", in: *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A* 159 (1996) 1, 165-73.

³⁰ TNA CAB 134/3137, Official Group on planning for reflation report, 21 October 1966.

³¹ TNA T 230/884, Cairncross to Armstrong, 18 January 1968.

at which the tectonic plates of policy moved were a real problem for active policymaking. As Trend told Wilson in 1968: ‘we still do not know enough, and know it in time to make use of the knowledge’.³² In terms of the terminology adopted in this article, perceptions of a very long-term structural upheaval – a British economic ‘decline’ lasting perhaps many decades – were being addressed via ideas and concepts taken from a construction of macroeconomics that might yield results across a shorter time-frame. This was causing enormous problems in the practical time in which Ministers and civil servants worked, trying to plan an economy and society from within a bureaucratic machine that seemed not to have secured the requisite intellectual time and space to cope with that task.

3. Crisis Time: The Second Half of the 1960s

‘Planning time’ was eventually undermined by a sequence of economic crises, in which immediate solutions and minute-by-minute calculations came to the fore – years in which the practical demands of how events seemed increasingly to crowd in on the policy-making community increasingly altered decision-makers’ ideas about how epistemic or political time passed. Each recurrent crisis saw the British pleading with the Americans, as Callaghan put it in the July 1965 crisis, that they ‘would really want some more time, as much as we can get, in order to do some consultations’.³³ These episodes involved the development of what felt like ‘crisis times’ – extremely pressurised and short-term periods of momentous and rapid choices that have seemed part and parcel of Western politics since the Enlightenment and Revolutions of the later eighteenth century.³⁴ These have been characterised by Reinhart Koselleck as emerging at that point as a newly secular, *temporal* concept under the pressure of medical ideas about critical moments in the life of the body as well as political concepts of particularly decisive moments of political choice that constantly follow one upon the other. He has identified three types of ‘crisis time’ that characterise this

³² TNA PREM 13/2067, Trend to Wilson, 1 March 1968.

³³ TNA PREM 13/257, Callaghan-Fowler telephone conversation record, minutes, 8 August 1965.

³⁴ R. Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, New York/ New York Eng. trans. 2004, esp. 50, 60.

variegated acceleration: the constant disruptive, judgemental, revelatory choices familiar from religious and particularly Christian thought; threshold crises, in which previous contradictions become intolerable, collapse under their own weight and inaugurate a new system; and the eschatological ‘final crisis of all history’, familiar from utopian thought and involving the end of human history itself.³⁵

The situation British governments now faced left very little room indeed for a leisurely pursuit of actual policy goals, fully justifying the sense of intense, crowded time which all three types of Koselleck’s typology share but which in this connection pertain specifically to his second category, which he himself identified as the most useful for analysing economic change. If currency realignment was forced on them, officials thought at the time that it was ‘unlikely’ that the Government would have even ten days building up to the ‘D-Day’ of devaluation itself.³⁶ The entire global economic system created at the end of the Second World War – and within which the pound sterling was a key element – appeared to be in danger of collapse, in very short order. When devaluation did become inevitable in November 1967, Wilson warned his Chancellor that having ‘any choice left... means time’ to develop other ideas, but that it ‘may be there is not even time to consider an alternative’.³⁷ As the Prime Minister put it to one Cabinet committee, evoking a sense of ongoing, constant but at root potentially epochal nature of their ‘shattering’ choices:

What we are facing is not one economic problem but a number, and in certain respects... they are separate problems differentiated by separate time scales. Moreover decisions and policies which may be highly relevant, even decisive, in relation to one particular problem, might be counter-productive in relation to problems with a different time scale... for example, there are certain measures, particularly on the capital account, or on imports, which might operate effectively on the late 1965 or 1966 balance of payments out-turn. But these by their nature might look panicky and thus might have an immediate effect on confidence, particularly if regarded as a step towards, or the last desperate throw before, a more shattering decision.³⁸

³⁵ R. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford/ Cal. 2002, 240-4.

³⁶ TNA T 312/1401, FU committee minutes, 30 March 1965.

³⁷ TNA PREM 13/1447, Wilson to Callaghan, 5 November 1967.

³⁸ TNA CAB 130/237, Wilson memorandum to MISC 69, 6 July 1965.

Koselleck's concept of 'compression' is the most useful here. The journalist and special adviser Samuel Brittan found being employed in Whitehall between 1964 and 1966 intensely frustrating, and quite unconnected to the real moment-by-moment decision-making of Cabinet Ministers. As he wrote, he could 'waste vast amount of time on speeches... on consulting Departments and people within own Ministry, clearing the whole time and constant retyping... this is quite apart from all the committees. Officials attend so many meetings with other officials at top and medium level that most of time taken up. Very little time to think'.³⁹ One paradox at the heart of Macmillan's period as Prime Minister was his sense of being 'out of time' with the increasing rapidity and fevered temper of the times, left without modern answers as one crisis followed another and psychological and cultural experts alike urged citizens to throw off the tyranny of the 'time-clock' and express themselves.⁴⁰ The passage of time was at the forefront of his mind, fearing that 'modern Conservatism' might boil down to nothing more than the fashions 'of those young ladies who oscillate daily between the stimulant and the tranquiliser... a policy of alternation between Benzedrine and Relaxa-Tabs'.⁴¹

On coming to power in 1964, George Brown as Labour's First Secretary of State had to plead with the trade unions that 'more time was needed to work out longer-term solutions'.⁴² Brown's brief – which ranged across European as well as economic issues while he was head of the DEA – indeed held him back from giving just such attention to systematic thinking. As his Permanent Secretary put it, permanent friction with the Americans and the EEC Six over trade and monetary

³⁹ Brittan diary, 24 November 1964, in: R. Middleton (ed.), *Inside the Department of Economic Affairs: Samuel Brittan, The Diary of an "Irregular"*, Oxford 2012, 60.

⁴⁰ M. Francis, "Tears, Tantrums, and Bared Teeth: The Emotional Economy of Three Conservative Prime Ministers, 1951–1963", in: *Journal of British Studies* 41 (2002) 3, 381–6.

⁴¹ N. Tiratsoo and J. Tomlinson, *The Conservatives and Industrial Efficiency, 1951–1964: Thirteen Wasted Years?*, London 1998, 28.

⁴² University of Warwick Modern Records Centre (hereafter UWMRC) MSS 292B/560.1/9, TUC Economic Committee, minutes, 26 October 1964.

policy, as well as wider diplomatic issues, left him ‘little time to take a systematic interest in the direction of the more general elements of economic policy’.⁴³ The permanent civil service was also able to insist on using pre-existing Treasury figures for Labour’s planning exercises, citing the risk of chaos prevailing otherwise. As one Treasury civil service put it: ‘to try to introduce new figures is bound to cause confusion and delay, for the whole process of discussion and examination is in any case complex and time-consuming’.⁴⁴ It was an important victory for the Treasury and its control over information, and the realisation that they did not have the resources for a decisive intellectual break-through added to the gloom within the DEA. As Brittan had found very early on in the DEA’s existence, the ‘weapon used for excluding people is “no time”’.⁴⁵ By the time of the Plan’s publication, advisers admitted that ‘because of the lack of time, much desirable work was left undone or was not fully considered’, and ‘all one can obtain is a simple figure for output and figures for investment and manpower corresponding... given the time scale... it is difficult to see what else could have been done’.⁴⁶

Official Whitehall was overstretched enough; the Government’s tripartite planning machinery felt the strain even more acutely. Labour in Opposition believed that part-time members could not possibly be effective, though they continued with the practice in the second half of the 1960s once in power – for instance in making appointments to Regional Economic Councils.⁴⁷ The sectoral Economic Development Committees, reliant on just such part-time trade unionists, businessmen and academics, moved only very slowly through their briefs.⁴⁸ EDCs’ input into public expenditure decisions was necessarily very limited indeed, for combing through these

⁴³ E. Roll, *Crowded Hours: An Autobiography*, London 1985, 172.

⁴⁴ TNA T 320/585, Vinter to MacDougall, 1 April 1965.

⁴⁵ Brittan diary, 5 November 1964, in: Middleton (ed.), *Samuel Brittan*, 54.

⁴⁶ TNA EW 24/46, Ennals memorandum, 5 November 1965; TNA EW 24/93, Lecotuber to Grieve Smith, 12 October 1965.

⁴⁷ DEA, *Economic Planning in the Regions*, London 1966, 5-6.

⁴⁸ TNA FG 1/9, Shone memorandum to NEDC, 24 June 1965.

complicated documents was often beyond their energies.⁴⁹ Whitehall observers despaired that ‘the members [of EDCs] are busy people with limited time to study the papers and they are liable to be influenced by the Chairman or an individual member who can develop convincingly a particular’.⁵⁰ Given such Councils’ lack of speedy action, the ineffectiveness then fed back into a sense of helplessness: trade union members, for instance, came to feel ‘that time and effort is wasted in preparing such recommendations’.⁵¹

The consequences for long-term thinking were very serious indeed, and it brought economic planning into disrepute in Britain much more quickly than elsewhere, for instance in France or West Germany. Britain’s unique mix of exposure to world currency markets, her large overseas defence spending and sterling’s reserve role in many countries made her much more vulnerable to financial crises and domestic retrenchment – elements that the French and Germans, increasingly able to enjoy the fruits of their own economic co-operation in the EEC, did not have to worry about until much later. The different structure of British capitalism thus helps, just as much as the countries’ very different intellectual histories, to explain the later advance of anti-planning views in those countries.⁵² The Councils thereafter often insisted on ‘adequate time for discussion within industry’ every time they even considered issuing a report, vividly exposing the divisions between employers, workers and government.⁵³ In 1968, by which time the National Plan was clearly discredited and the Government was committed to a more ‘flexible’ approach, the professional Economic Planning Boards supposed to support the Councils were told that there

⁴⁹ TNA EW 24/56, Beddoe memorandum to DEA/ EPB Chairmen meeting, 6 September 1965.

⁵⁰ TNA EW 7/315, Beagley memorandum to Allen, 12 October 1967.

⁵¹ UWMRC MSS 292B/557.4/3, TUC Office memorandum to Production Committee, 6 June 1968.

⁵² For this later shift in France and West Germany, see F. Denord, “French Neoliberalism and its Divisions”, in: P. Mirowski and D. Plehwe (eds.), *The Road From Mont Pelerin*, Cambridge/ Mass. 2009, 60-3, and K.H.F. Dyson, “The Politics of Economic Management in West Germany”, in: W.E. Paterson and G.R. Smith (eds.), *The West German Model: Perspectives on a Stable State*, London 1981, 35-55.

⁵³ TNA EW 24/118, Motor vehicles distribution and repair EDC, minutes, 10 June 1967.

should be ‘less time devoted to it [planning] than last year – [it should be] more of an updating exercise’.⁵⁴

This same sense of inadequate timeframes caused problems in other areas as well. The British Productivity Council, an important element in Labour’s later attempt to reduce inefficiencies via specific interventions, complained continuously about its reliance on part-time staff.⁵⁵ Without such expert advice, as Peter Shore at the Ministry of Technology complained at the time when considering industrial productivity surveys, ‘it is very difficult to identify particular projects of this nature and... it takes a considerable time to mount them’.⁵⁶ The ideological time-horizon was now very compressed indeed, while the day-to-day practicalities of Ministers and civil servants’ actual practices were hurried, rushed and full of anxiety: the attempt to alter very deep-seated structural trends, as they were perceived at the time, and over the timeframe affected by economic policy, had run into an impasse from which it never truly recovered.

4. From the 1960s to the 1970s: The Time Horizon Collapses

Just a few years later, the overriding impression was a dearth of long-term planning as Whitehall and Westminster’s time preferences became measured in days rather than weeks, let alone months or years. By 1973 the Conservative Government of Edward Heath was embroiled in a political battle to the death with the trade unions, especially the National Union of Mineworkers. This required a series of day-to-day interventions by, and negotiations involving, the Prime Minister that a truly ‘planned’ series of agreements with labour and capital would have prevented. As the emphasis on strikes perhaps suggests, the Heath Government mounted an extremely aggressive attempt to control monthly and yearly wage rises – something, in its early free-market months in

⁵⁴ TNA EW 24/200 part I, DEA officials’ meeting with EPB Chairmen, minutes, 4 July 1968.

⁵⁵ See e.g. TNA LAB 10/3000, Productivity Services Advisory Group, minutes, 17 November 1966.

⁵⁶ TNA CAB 134/2915, Shore memorandum to Ministerial Committee on Industrial Policy, 16 February 1968.

power, it had publicly promised never to do.⁵⁷ During the winter of 1970-71 the Government informally and quietly hoped for ‘de-escalation’: the gradual reduction of public sector wage increases, over eighteen months or two years, so as to eventually influence the whole economy. Tripartite talks in the summer and autumn of 1972 looked ahead only about a year, though Ministers, unions and employers would meet again every year to share out what *The Spectator* called ‘the cake’.⁵⁸ The TUC still rejected the deal *in toto*, and the ‘Downing Street talks’ were followed by a statutory 90-day freeze and a ‘stage II’ incomes policy imposed on an annual basis.⁵⁹

By the end of the Heath ‘experiment’, very little faith was left in such long-term or synoptic government ‘solutions’. Even an emollient Conservative such as Douglas Hurd, closely involved in Heath’s attempt to regenerate the British economy, thought by now that ‘there has to be a permanent shift of balance away from the public to the private sector... an effective restraint on the power of trade unions. The willpower of Ministers is not in itself enough’.⁶⁰ Labour’s last attempt to secure a ‘social contract’ with the unions was born in a similar atmosphere of crisis and dispute, and more importantly for our purposes here was also reached after a series of annual negotiations between government and unions.⁶¹ After a period of success in

⁵⁷ R. Taylor, “The Heath Government, Industrial Policy and the ‘New Capitalism’”, in: S. Ball and A. Seldon (eds.), *The Heath Government 1970-74: A Reappraisal*, London 1996, 148-52.

⁵⁸ W. H. Fishbein, *Wage Restraint by Consensus: Britain’s Search for an Incomes Policy Agreement, 1965-1979*, London 1984, 68-9.

⁵⁹ M. Holmes, *The Failure of the Heath Government*, 2nd edn., Basingstoke 1997, 84-100.

⁶⁰ D. Hurd, *An End to Promises: Sketch of a Government, 1970-74*, London 1979, 141.

⁶¹ A. Dean, “Incomes Policy and the British Economy in the 1970s”, in: R.E.J. Chater, A. Dean and R.F. Elliott (eds.), *Incomes Policy*, Oxford, 1981, 20-1; R. Taylor, “The Rise and Fall of the Social Contract”, in: A. Seldon and K. Hickson (eds.), *New Labour, Old Labour: The Wilson and Callaghan Governments, 1974-1979*, London 2004, 73-82.

1975-77 this concept also collapsed in total impasse over the winter of 1978-79 – discrediting the concept for an entire generation.⁶²

Policies that were supposed to hold for only ninety days – and which relied on the threat of legal sanction to make them effective at all – were of course a far cry from the five- to twenty-year time horizons of the mid-1960s. It might be felt in this sense that time had ‘speeded up’, and indeed there was a sense of prevailing crisis: the faltering of post-war economic growth after the oil price shock of 1973 helped to undermine confidence in the benign state action that had so characterised the post-war political system. Growth did slow very radically. Western European growth stood at just over four per cent a year in the period 1950-73; in the years to come, between 1973 and 1998, it would average only 1.8 per cent. In Britain, those figures were 2.4 per cent and 1.8 per cent, making the contrast a little less stark.⁶³ But the slowdown still led to talk of a general ‘crisis of the 1970s’, during which the so-called ‘misery index’ of the inflation plus the unemployment rate mounted alarmingly to a peak of over 30 per cent in 1976. By 1975 a Labour Secretary of State for the Environment, Anthony Crosland, was telling local councils and trade unionists that, as far as public spending was concerned, ‘the party’s over’. Some of the deepest state expenditure cuts in post-war history followed.⁶⁴ The run of humiliations culminated in the emblematic September 1976 run on sterling, which forced Chancellor Denis Healy into his famous return from Heathrow Airport to try to stem the crisis and then convinced the Cabinet to apply for the IMF loan.⁶⁵

⁶² C. Hay, ‘Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the “Winter of Discontent”’, in: *Sociology* 30 (1996) 2, 253-77; J. Thomas, “‘Bound in By History’: The Winter of Discontent in British Politics, 1979-2004”, in: *Media, Culture and Society* 29 (2007) 2, 263-283.

⁶³ A. Maddison, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*, Paris 2001, table 3-1a, 126, table 3-7, 132.

⁶⁴ P. Whitehead, *The Writing on the Wall: Britain in the Seventies*, London 1985, 150-3.

⁶⁵ K. Burk and A. Cairncross, “‘Goodbye Great Britain’”: *The 1976 IMF Crisis*, London 1992, 55-6; K. Hickson, *The IMF Crisis of 1976 and British Politics*, London 2005, 101; D. Wass, *Decline to Fall: The Making of British Macro-Economic Policy and the 1976 IMF Crisis*, Oxford 2008, 225-6, 229.

But the process of disintegration had been going on for rather longer than that narrative might suggest, as the rhetoric of an apparent ‘time for decision’ in the early 1960s, and of recurrent crisis in the late 1960s, in fact suggests. The whole point of the long-term public spending exercises that were recommended by the 1961 Plowden Report was to impose limits and enforce more rational choices: subsequent rapid rises in public spending gradually undermined the whole concept.⁶⁶ Voters’ and policy-makers’ time-preferences (and the timeframes of different economic benefits) were highly uncertain, as economists such as Alec Cairncross warned from inside the bureaucracy; worse, the ‘planners’, and the departmental bureaucrats who had every incentive to frustrate them, were linked together by very few lines of institutional authority.⁶⁷ By the time Labour was preparing its National Plan during 1965, those tensions were palpable. As the DEA’s Economic Consultant C.A.E. Goodhart put it, ‘information won’t seep through, decisions won’t be taken, and the country will blissfully continue in the serene hope that short term deflation and long term growth, for example, are compatible’.⁶⁸

Long term incomes policies had also been placed under severe strain as far back as the national currency crisis of summer 1966, replaced as they were by an immediate short-term ‘freeze’ and a ‘period of severe restraint’.⁶⁹ The different timeframes involved in policymaking were particularly stark in this field, with the TUC’s General Secretary telling Brown that ‘his main problem was the amount of time they were given on each issue they considered, e.g. the National Plan had been too hurried’.⁷⁰ The trade union leadership despaired collectively in 1967 that ‘the main

⁶⁶ For long-term planning as a ‘limit’, see TNA T 325/64, Bligh to Macmillan, 6 April 1960; TNA PREM 11/4778, Trend to Macmillan, 31 July 1963; G. Peden, *The Treasury and British Public Policy, 1906-1959*, Oxford 2000, 524.

⁶⁷ TNA T 230/694, Cairncross memorandum to Economic Steering Committee, 2 March 1962.

⁶⁸ TNA EW 24/93, Goodhart to MacDougall, n.d., (June?) 1965.

⁶⁹ J. Tomlinson, *The Labour Governments 1964-1970, Vol. III: Economic Policy*, Manchester 2004, 136-7; L. Panitch, *Social Democracy and Industrial Militancy: The Labour Party, the Trade Unions and Incomes Policy, 1945-1974*, Cambridge 1976, 106-16.

⁷⁰ UWMRC MSS 200C/3/DG1/4, Brown meeting with TUC and CBI, minutes, 1 March 1966.

disagreements on incomes policy have stemmed from the different perspectives and different time scales of the TUC and the Government. To the TUC incomes policy is pre-eminently a long-term instrument of planning... The Government however has regarded incomes policy as primarily a short-term regulator of incomes and costs'.⁷¹

These contradictions demonstrate just how deep-seated were the conflicts between the different types of time we have been delineating here. Lawrence Black and Hugh Pemberton have recently, and quite rightly, questioned the whole concept of a general 'crisis' in the 1970s – a period during which economic growth was higher than the immediate shock of recession made it feel, and a decade during which the increasing availability of technologically advanced consumer goods and the successes achieved by new social movements made many Britons feel ever more liberated.⁷² But there can be little doubt that there was a *sense* and a *rhetoric* of that crisis. Political scientists wrote of a 'crisis of confidence' in the system, or a 'crisis of ungovernability'.⁷³ One political commentator mused in 1978 about the potential for semi-dictatorship 'if the country appeared to be heading for really alarming chaos', while a *Telegraph* journalist preparing to write a piece of advice for the middle class was told that the best thing to include would be: 'board up the windows and erect a barbed-wire barricade'.⁷⁴ Part of this sense of deep foreboding was caused by multiple clashes between long-term thinking – structural, economic, ideological in the sense of the new methods advocated by planners– and very different perceptions reflected in newly-pervasive ideologies of crisis management and the day-to-day management of the British state. Some of the former elements had held out the hope of dissolving deep class, generational and racial fissures in British society: such cadences, however, now seemed to have been replaced only with endless disputes in detail.

5. Conclusions

⁷¹ UWMRC MSS 292B/560.1/15, TUC report to conference of executives, 11 January 1967.

⁷² L. Black and H. Pemberton, "The Benighted Decade? Reassessing the 1970s", in: L. Black, H. Pemberton and P. Thane (eds.), *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, Manchester 2013, 9, 16-17.

⁷³ R. Rose, "Ungovernability: Is There Fire Behind the Smoke?", in: *Political Studies* 27 (1979) 3, 354.

⁷⁴ M. Garnett, *From Anger to Apathy: The British Experience since 1975*, London 2007, 84, 86.

The shifting and above all historical nature of time was critical to Foucault's view of language and 'representation'. Instead of words representing 'facts' or objectives inherently, in and of themselves, his 1966 work *Les Mots et Les Choses* made clear that time actually insisted *inside* language and meaning, as well as providing a framework for them..⁷⁵ The categorisation mobilised here – structural, economic, ideological, practical – represents an attempt to show how historians might begin to perceive how this process works in two directions: first, as the press of events alters historical actors' views of time, and then as each subsequent conceptualisation affects their actions in turn. Economic 'realities' and political 'perceptions' do usually operate in very different timeframes. Beneath each conceptual phase examined here ran actual changes in the economy, familiar perhaps from the long-term work of Braudel and others – glacial in comparison to constantly altering senses of Britain's success or failure, but proceeding steadily nonetheless. Many policymakers in this period did indeed think of economics as occurring over the 'long term', and mere politics as 'short term': but the narrative here has also revealed how these categories inevitably bled into one another in terms of how economy and society were *perceived*, until it was hard to tell which was which during the difficulties of 1970s.

We might now, therefore, place different types of time up against one another so as to analyse their perceived historical character at the time they were experienced. The late 1950s saw politicians moving forwards in a vague, hopeful manner, employing the rhetoric of relatively 'timeless' and vague exhortation while the economy seemed to grow relatively painlessly; the early 1960s was a period during which national leaders seized on the promise of fashionable long-term 'planning' to resolve difficulties; the later 1960s and early 1970s saw those ambitions dissolve into bouts of short-term crisis management before a even more constant present-minded sense of endings and potential new departures replaced them in the 1970s . Our four very different senses of time's efficacy and role – exhortatory, planned, collapsing, and then full of crises – seem best explored via the concepts we have summarised

⁷⁵ M. Mahon, *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, Power, and the Subject*, Albany/ New York 1992, 70-3.

here: structural, economic, ideological and practical, all of which can play a role in helping us understand each phase of post-war policymaking in turn.

An eschatological sense of the desirability of a ‘new beginning’ eventually took hold during the 1970s, seeking to break free from these complexities. The emotions were engaged by such imagery: as Foucault once noted, there is a constant and ‘facile’ temptation to paint our own times as a uniquely dark abyss, only broken by a ‘morning’ or a ‘dawn’.⁷⁶ The way in which fascist and terrorist groups have mobilised similar rhetorics of a ‘decisive’ or ‘end’ time has been well delineated by Griffin, demonstrating just how widespread – and how dependent on temporal perceptions – such efforts are.⁷⁷ The mid- to late-1970s in this sense became a period during which some commentators – for instance the monetarist thinker Milton Friedman – seemed to think that ‘Britain was on the verge of collapse’, and that ‘the odds are at least 50-50 that within the next five years British freedom and democracy... will be destroyed’.⁷⁸ Mobilising their own and particularly extreme variant of ‘crisis time’, analysts such as Friedman relied on a highly suspect and contested figure – that 60 per cent of GNP was being spent by the UK state – but his more general senses of a decisive crisis, and a potential new beginning, were widespread.⁷⁹ It was not, in the end, a case that could prevail for long – either evidentially or rhetorically. The prosaic realities of governing, even during the relatively ideological 1980s, would see to that.⁸⁰ The Conservatives moved cautiously at first towards their supply-side objectives, for instance privatisation and trade union

⁷⁶ M. Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*, London 2010, 54.

⁷⁷ R. Griffin, *Terrorist's Creed: Fanatical Violence and the Human Need for Meaning*, Basingstoke 2012, 16, 20-4, 49, 51, 77; see also R. Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, Basingstoke, 2007, 269.

⁷⁸ M. Friedman, “The Line We Dare Not Cross: The Fragility of Freedom at 60%”, in: *Encounter*, November 1976, 9.

⁷⁹ E. Nelson, “Milton Friedman and U.K. Economic Policy: 1938–1979”, in: *Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis Working Papers* 2009-017 (2009), 94.

⁸⁰ J. Tomlinson, “Tale of a Death Exaggerated: How Keynesian Policies Survived the 1970s”, in: *Contemporary British History* 21 (2007) 4, 429-48.

reform. But a truly Thatcherite or neo-liberal sense of the limited time which remained to correct Britain's economic malaise, linked to the more doom-laden pronouncements of the 1970s, was on display in macroeconomic policy. Here an initially monetarist-inspired dose of shock therapy saw the government rely on high interest rates rapidly to 'shake out' inflation and economic efficiency.⁸¹

Looking back beyond the apparent break-point of 1979, several insights may be taken from this analysis of British governments' sense of time between the 1950s and the 1970s. A sense of complex, conflicting, paradoxical timeframes is an analytical framework useful for scrutinising governance itself.⁸² But the continual and rapid erasure of governors' temporal principles, and their eventual collapse into confusion, are a particularly stark reminder that there was never one overriding sense of how 'time' worked. Such perceptions all react to economic and social reality, but as imagined by those experiencing it and hoping to shape it: in this case, as mediated via the needs, hopes and fears of decision-makers in Whitehall and Westminster. The relationships between structural, economic, ideological and practical time are more than helpful analytically, but they are always in flux. As the economic historian Richard du Boff has put it, 'the historical evolution of an economy is, by definition, a series of short runs. But no two successions of short runs ever look the same'.⁸³

⁸¹ M. Matthijs, *Ideas and Economic Crises in Britain from Attlee to Blair*, London 2011, 138-9.

⁸² R. Kosellek, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, New edn., New York/ New York 2004, e.g. 94.

⁸³ R.B. Du Boff, "Towards a New Macroeconomic History", in: W. Milberg (ed.), *The Megacorp and Macro-Dynamics: Essays in Memory of Alfred Eichner*, New York/ New York 1992, 253.